

“Hear This Word That the Lord Has Spoken Against You”

Sermons on the Minor Prophets: The Book of Amos (3)

Texts: Amos 3:1-4:13 (read 3:1-8)/Romans 8:1-11

Everyone dreads the thought of being sued. It is an unnerving thing to get a summons informing you that you must appear before the municipal court. Image what it would like to be sued by YHWH, the covenant landlord of the Promised Land. It falls to the prophet Amos to announce the terms of YHWH's lawsuit from the heavenly court to the people of Israel. In our text (chapters 3 and 4 of the Book of Amos), we find two parts of such a covenant lawsuit—stern words of warning (chapter 3) and frightening words of inevitable judgment (chapter 4). Since Amos functions as a heavenly process server, this raises the question, “what exactly does it mean to be “sued by YHWH?” Whatever it means, it cannot be good. In fact, it is a declaration of the worst thing imaginable—YHWH's wrath is soon fall upon his disobedient people, Israel.

YHWH's verdict and words of indictment do come in a legal form grounded in his covenant made with Israel. But at this point whatever analogy exists between a heavenly court and an earthly court breaks down. *Judge Judy*, the *People's Court*, and *Law and Order* are of little help to us as illustrations. YHWH's judgments are altogether righteous, made in light of his perfect holiness and justice. His decrees are issued in conformity to both his promises and his commands. He is a judge unlike all earthly judges. As creator of all things, he is the sovereign king whose judgments reflect his divine nature. YHWH alone has the right and the power to execute justice as he sees fit. YHWH has a perfect record of dealing righteously and patiently with his disobedient, rebellious, covenant subjects, Israel. Unless we keep this in mind, the words we read may strike us as foreign, even cruel.

It is common to hear people say things like, “My God would never do such a thing.” Or “I think God is like . . .” Or even, “God is love, he would accept everyone, he wouldn't judge people.” A passage such as the one before us should disavow us of all such wrong headed notions about God. God is not “your” God. He is the God who dwells in unapproachable light. He is your creator—you are his. It doesn't matter what we think God is like because God reveals himself to us in his words and judgments, such as the judgment about to come upon Israel. As for the notion that God accepts us as we are without judging us, such a notion attempts to evade the truth that God judges everyone according to the standard of his holy law. We may not like it, but this is the God who is, not the God we want and then invent. God is love—the reason why he provides a means of salvation for his rebellious creatures. But God is also holy and must judge and punish all people for their sin. Given the heightened sensitivity people have today to any form of personal criticism (“who are you to judge me?”), we must acknowledge that what we are about to hear from YHWH through the mouth of the prophet Amos are difficult words. But they are YHWH's words nonetheless.

This is why it is vital that we place Amos' oracles of warning and impending doom in their historical context (as we labored to do in those weeks when we covered background to the Minor Prophets). Recall from our brief survey of the closing chapters of Deuteronomy (28-34), before Joshua led the nation of Israel into the promised land (Canaan), Moses (on the day of his death) presided over a covenant renewal ceremony on the plains of Moab with the assembled nation, rehearsing in detail the blessings and curses of the covenant which YHWH made with his people. The blessing-curse principle is as simple as “obey and receive God's blessing,” or “disobey and come under God's curse.”

The blessing-curse principle lay at the heart of the distinction we make between the Law (what God demands of us) and the gospel (what God graciously gives us in Christ). What we will hear in Amos' words to Israel is both a warning to repent, as well as foretelling of Israel's immediate future—destruction and exile when Assyria invades the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. and utterly destroys it. In other words, there is no gospel in these words from the heavenly court, although a promise of future restoration does come in a later oracle YHWH gives through Amos (as we will see in coming weeks).

In chapter 1:3-2:16 Amos revealed that judgment begins in the house of the Lord. If the people of Israel were thrilled to hear that YHWH was going to judge those nations who were Israel's enemies, they must have been shocked by Amos' oracle that YHWH would judge Israel for its sins just as harshly as he will judge Israel's enemies. For Israel, it is now too late—judgment will fall within a generation.

Amos' warning of impending judgment does not come out of the blue, as though YHWH lost his temper and is lashing out in anger. YHWH has been very patient with this disobedient people. Israel was first constituted as a united kingdom when YHWH chose this people, then sent Moses, calling his people out of their bondage in Egypt, bringing them safely through the Red Sea and then to the foot of Mount Sinai. There, YHWH made a covenant with his people and then forty years later (after the people endured their time in the wilderness) YHWH renewed his covenant with them (the Book of Deuteronomy). Israel entered the promised land, and with YHWH as their captain, they conquered most of Canaan (the conquest—the theme of the Book of Joshua). Israel is the only nation in world history to enjoy such a blessing—chosen by YHWH to be his covenant people. But with blessing comes great responsibility. Canaan belongs to YHWH. His people may dwell in the land if they obey YHWH's covenant.

The traditional date for the giving of law at Sinai is somewhere around 1300 B.C., give or take fifty years on either end. The entire time after Israel entered Canaan until the time of Amos (a span of six hundred years), Israel repeatedly sinned, was oppressed by Canaanite tribes, only to be delivered by YHWH. This is the sad record found in the Book of Judges. Even when David and Solomon later reigned over a united Israel about 1000 B.C., the pattern of the nation's sin and YHWH's call to repentance continued. The people's spiritual decline eventually led to the terrible civil war about 950 B.C., which resulted in the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel. YHWH sent his prophets, one after the other (we can think of Elijah and Elisha) to warn Israel (the Northern Kingdom) of the covenant curses, and then to patiently call his disobedient and spiritually adulterous people to repentance. YHWH's call was heeded by some, but then quickly forgotten and the spiritual decline resumed at an ever-greater pace.

By 760 BC, the time of Amos, the spiritual health of God's people had declined so thoroughly that Jeroboam II, the king of Israel, presided over an apparently wealthy, safe, and religious nation. Yet, the sad reality was that Israel was now more pagan in its beliefs and practices than Hebrew (biblical). The people had forsaken YHWH and his covenant to the point that they saw nothing wrong with what they were doing. Their hearts had grown hard toward their covenant LORD, who always stood willing to forgive them, if only they would repent. According to Amos 5:21-24, Jeroboam II presided over a nation with priests whose sacrifices YHWH no longer accepted. The people offered worship which YHWH refused to hear. As the nation became prosperous, the king, the royal house, and the merchants grew increasingly greedy and preoccupied with luxury—all the while neglecting and mocking the poor, many of whom they enslaved. It is the hypocrisy of the king and the wealthy in their profession of "true religion," while at the same time denying and ignoring what YHWH demands in his covenant (charity toward those in need), which brings Amos forth from the heavenly court with YHWH's lawsuit against Israel.

YHWH has heard the pleas of the poor, those who love him, his covenant, and his word. He will deliver

them. But woe to Israel, that nation of hypocrites who ignore the plight of those they exploit. YHWH's long-suffering patience (for some six hundred years) is over. Amos comes as YHWH's process server to inform Israel that the end is near. But it is a huge mistake to hear Amos' oracles of judgment as though these are new words without historical context. Rather, Amos is among the last in a long series of prophets, who have repeatedly warned Israel of what would happen should the people and their leaders not repent and continue in their sin and idolatry. To put it in simplest terms, Amos' message is "time's up." His words are frightening beyond human imagination. They remind us of the words from the author of Hebrews (10:31) who reflects upon those who insist upon standing before God in their own righteousness—"it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

in this sermon, then, we will take up the two oracles in chapters 3-4. The first of these oracles (chapter 3) has four parts: an introduction in vv. 1-2, followed by Amos' response in verses 3-8 to those who insisted that he cease from prophesying because his words undoubtedly upset and angered all who heard them. Amos next appeals to witnesses from Ashdod and Egypt who testify of Israel's decline, then announcing that a devastating judgment is certain to come (vv. 9-12), before closing with an epilogue in vv. 13-15 which reminds the people that this is not Amos' opinion, but YHWH's solemn declaration.¹

In the first two verses of chapter 3, Amos summons the people of Israel to hear YHWH's oracle against them. The prophet has come on official business as an emissary from the heavenly court. "*Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.'*" The speaker is Amos, but the words are YHWH's, coming to Israel through the mouth of his prophet. Amos proclaims to Israel that which YHWH has revealed to him in the dream which called Amos to his prophetic office. The word YHWH speaks refers to the whole family of God (taking us back all the way to Abraham and Sarah),² and is uttered "against the people of Israel." This refers to the ten tribes who together with the people of Judah, composed that one family (Jacob's descendants—all twelve tribes) who were called out of Egypt, passing together through the Red Sea to Sinai, where God constituted them an undivided nation. YHWH reminds the people of Israel of their heritage and that they are sinfully divided from their brethren in Judah.

Israel was chosen by YHWH (according to his sovereign purpose), to be his covenant people, who now operate under the blessing-curse principle. Given Israel's long, sustained, and ever-increasing history of covenant breaking, YHWH's patience is at its end. Israel hears frightening words no one ever wants to hear, "*I will punish you for all your iniquities.*" Yes, YHWH is merciful. But he is also holy, and he must punish all sin—a fact revealed throughout YHWH's history of dealing with his people.

Although nothing is said in the text, it is clear from what comes next that the people of Israel have commanded Amos to stop prophesying. Amos responds by asking and answering a series of rhetorical questions designed to make the point that because of Israel's sin, YHWH is obligated to speak words of judgment. We find seven such questions and answers in verses 3-6 referring to things joined together. "*Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet? Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Does a young lion cry out from his den, if he has taken nothing? Does a bird fall in a snare on the earth, when there is no trap for it? Does a snare spring up from the ground, when it has taken nothing?*"

¹ Boda and McConville, eds., Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets, 7.

² Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Amos 3:2.

Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?" The point of these questions and answers is that when YHWH speaks words of judgment it is because he is obligated to do so by his nature and covenant. Once YHWH speaks these words, will he then not act? In light of Israel's sin, what else can YHWH do? Lay aside his holiness? Chose not enforce his own covenant? No. Once YHWH sounds the trumpet, he will bring disaster. Amos is, in effect, sounding that trumpet. Disaster must follow.

In verses 7-8 Amos warns his hearers, *"for the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy?"* Israel has broken covenant despite being repeatedly warned to repent and return to the Lord. YHWH has sent numerous prophets to Israel, warning, instructing, reminding them of YHWH's will, his love and his mercy, yet the consequence is still nothing but continual sin and the forsaking of the covenant, all the while the people worship other gods. YHWH has revealed what is coming to his prophets, who, in turn, must reveal this to Israel. The lion (the LORD) has roared. Should not Israel be terrified, yet relieved, that YHWH would still receive them, if only Israel would repent.

At this point, YHWH calls witnesses from pagan nations of Israel's atrocities toward the poor in their midst. We read in verses 9-10, *"proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt, and say, 'Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria, and see the great tumults within her, and the oppressed in her midst. 'They do not know how to do right,' declares the LORD, 'those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.'"* Ashdod in Gaza was home to the Philistines, who along with Egypt were Israel's cruelest historic oppressors. Even the Philistines and Egyptians would be horrified by the conduct of Samaria (the regional heart of Israel) toward the poor. They too would see and recognize that Israel has fallen so far that no one knows how to do right.

YHWH reveals to Israel their fate (in verses 11-12). *"Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'An adversary shall surround the land and bring down your defenses from you, and your strongholds shall be plundered.'"* This is a reference to Assyria to the north. *"Thus says the LORD: 'As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed.'"* All the people of Israel will have left will be but pieces of the luxuries bought with ill-gotten gain taken from the poor.

The oracle ends with YHWH's solemn covenant oath (vv. 13-15). *"Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob,' declares the Lord GOD, the God of hosts, that on the day I punish Israel for his transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground. I will strike the winter house along with the summer house, and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end,' declares the LORD."* Israel's material wealth will be plundered. Their wealth will vanish before their eyes (their fine ivory, their summer and winter homes, their grand estates). The current period of peace will end when invaders impose their own pagan religion upon Israel, sacking and looting the golden alters at Bethel, destroying the alter where the sacrifices were offered which YHWH refused to accept. It is no wonder that the people of Israel forbade Amos from prophesying! But Amos is not done. There is yet another oracle. YHWH will roar again even louder.

In chapter 4 (vv. 1-13) we come to a second oracle, this one spoken by YHWH Elohim (the LORD God) who swears by his holiness. Holiness means "set apart from," in this case YHWH is transcendent (other than and independent from his creation). He is eternal and the creator of all things. That he is holy

means he is deity itself.³ He is altogether righteous, without any hint or shadow of finitude, weakness, or sin. He issues decrees and commands which reflect his holiness and eternal nature. Because he is Holy, YHWH's revealed will is the standard of right and wrong for all his creatures. Whenever we go our own way and worship and act as we please, we have sinned against the Holy God, who in this oracle reminds Israel of this very thing—he alone is Holy.

The oracle contains a list of sins (those times Israel has broken or rejected God's holy laws), and then a list of condemnations. In verses 1-3, the women of Samaria are addressed, before YHWH condemns Israel's worship of him (worship not in accordance with his revealed will) in verse 4-5. Then, in verses 6-13, YHWH recounts the history of his dealings with his people in light of their stubborn and sinful desire to go their own way, even worshipping Baal—the Canaanite weather/fertility god.⁴

In verses 1-3, YHWH speaks to the real housewives of Samaria. *“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’ The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. And you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead; and you shall be cast out into Harmon,” declares the LORD.*” Bashan was an area well known for large cattle. The implication is that the wealthy women of Israel (the royal court and the merchants' wives) have grown fat (figuratively speaking) and shamelessly flaunt their wealth in the face of the poor. They sip their wine while those whom they have enslaved are at their beck and call.

We know what happens to a fish when it is swimming along, minding its own business, then attracted by the hook which will suddenly pull it from the safety of water to an atmosphere in which it cannot breathe and where death is certain. This passage is likely in Jesus' mind when he calls his disciples “fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). We think of this strictly in terms of evangelism—cast your nets (preach the gospel) and reel in the harvest (those who believe). We forget though what happens to the fish (those caught). They die. The metaphor as used by Jesus certainly refers to evangelism, but let us not miss that those who come to Christ, must die to self, and seek first his kingdom and righteousness.

In verses 4-5, YHWH denounces the pagan-influenced worship offered to him by the priests of Israel. *“Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!” declares the Lord GOD.*” YHWH mocks those who go through the motions and then dare think themselves righteous because they do so. These people are like Cain, offering their sacrifice with no regard to the guilt of their sins. They brag about their generosity with their offerings while the poor suffer at their doing. They are not worshipping YHWH in accordance with his word. They are only multiplying their sin.

Then, in verses 6-13, YHWH gives them a history lesson, by reminding them of the covenant curses he threatened (as set out in Deuteronomy 28-34) and how he has dealt with his disobedient people in the past (Israel's time in Canaan). This part of the oracle is a rehearsal of past judgments which came upon Israel much of the time they were in Canaan. The first curse is found in verse 6, famine. *“I gave you*

³ J. A. Motyer, The Message of Amos (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 1974), 90.

⁴ Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Amos 4:1.

cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me," declares the LORD." This is followed by drought (v. 7-8), *"I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would have rain, and the field on which it did not rain would wither; so two or three cities would wander to another city to drink water, and would not be satisfied; yet you did not return to me," declares the LORD.*" After the drought comes blight (v. 9). *"I struck you with blight and mildew; your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured; yet you did not return to me," declares the LORD.*" And then came pestilence (10a) like those plagues YHWH brought upon Egypt. *"I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt."* All of these curses were threatened before Israel entered the promised land.

But the harshest of the curses came in the form of YHWH withdrawing his protection of his people, and then bringing their enemies upon Israel as YHWH's avengers. We read in verse 10b, *"I killed your young men with the sword, and carried away your horses, and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils; yet you did not return to me," declares the LORD.*" The only peace and prosperity Israel has ever known came through YHWH's protection. When his people turn their backs upon him, he gives them what they crave—the favor of those nations whose gods Israel serves in addition to YHWH, but who will turn upon Israel and savage them. Generations of young men died in battle, their military equipment was taken in plunder, and the stench of their bodies filled the air. Still Israel did not repent and worship and serve YHWH. He reminds them in verse 11, *"I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning; yet you did not return to me," declares the LORD.*" With the brief history lesson now over, we see that the old adage is true—those who do not learn the lessons of the past will inevitably repeat previous mistakes.

So what is Israel's fate? Amos announces YHWH's final verdict in verses 12-13. *"Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!"* Israel is doomed to destruction. All that is left for Israel is to prepare to meet YHWH in the day of judgment—the Day of the Lord (our subject for next time).

What can we take with us by way of application? For one thing, God is transcendent and unknowable by sinful humans unless and until he reveals himself—which he does in nature, in his word, and then supremely in Jesus Christ. This why all opinions about God—however sincere—are nothing but wishful thinking or mere opinion. The God of the Bible is the Holy God, the creator of all things. He made a covenant with Israel and promised them the greatest of blessings, if only . . . But like Adam failed to obey his creator in Eden, so too Israel (and eventually Judah) will repeatedly disobey God's commands. As Adam was expelled from Eden when he rebelled, so too, Israel and Judah will be expelled from the Promised Land. Israel will be destroyed. Judah will be taken in exile into Babylon. YHWH is loving and merciful, but he is also Holy—an attribute which offends sinful people deeply. This explains why virtually all modern conceptions of God ignore his holiness. The gods we invent always bless us in our sin. They require of us is what Israel offered to YHWH—worship more pagan than biblical, worship of other gods (you know—Co-exist), and superficial good works which we think will stave off judgment.

If we think God's judgment on Israel was severe, we ought to reflect upon the fact that this judgment was temporal—defeat, conquest, and exile. This judgment and others like it remind us that the God of the Bible is holy, and however much we try to deny it or evade this fact, there is coming a day of final judgment and an eternal punishment (the Day of the Lord—something we'll address in more detail next

time). The God who reveals himself in his word gives to us a solemn warning in the judgment of Israel, who's sins are our sins. Do we worship with grateful hearts because God sent to us a Savior from our sins? Do we give our tithes and offerings (here and elsewhere) to feel good about ourselves, or to help the poor and further the gospel ministry? Do we view our nation's prosperity, relative peace, and full churches as the sign that all is right with the Lord? Beloved we are much more like Israel than we care to admit.

But unlike Israel in the days of Amos, God's promised restoration is for us a reality. We have the words Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome (as we read in the first part of Romans 8, our New Testament). *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."* If you are trusting in Jesus Christ, you are walking in the Spirit. In Jesus Christ, you have been set free from the law of sin and death—YHWH's covenant curse. Because Jesus was condemned in the flesh, our judgment day was in the past (Good Friday). Amos proclaimed the covenant curse, *"the word that the Lord has spoken against"* his disobedient people. But Paul proclaims to us the word of covenant blessing earned for us by Jesus. In Romans 8:31 Paul reminds us, *"if God be for us, who can be against us?"* The reason God is for us is given in Romans 8:1. *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*